

SINGAPORE snippets

Long-term investment in SAF has paid off, says DPM Tan

Long-term investment in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) has paid off, as seen from Singapore's speedy response to the recent tsunami disaster and its success at providing aid to its neighbours.

Said Deputy Prime Minister Tony Tan: "If we had not modernised the SAF through the acquisition of the heavy-lift Chinook helicopters and the Endurance-class Landing Ship Tanks in the 1990s, Singapore would be constrained in providing assistance today."

Dr Tan, who is also Co-ordinating Minister for Security and Defence, was at Friday's launch of the second of the Singapore Navy's five locally-built frigates, the RSS Steadfast.

These will be equipped with state-of-the-art command-and-control systems, sensors, weapons and naval helicopters. — Channel NewsAsia

False claim to MOM lands foreign worker in jail

A foreign worker from India has been jailed for three months for trying to cheat the Ministry of Manpower by making a false claim under the Workmen's Compensation Act.

Mr Ramasamy Subramaniyan said he accidentally cut off his left finger with an axe on July 25 last year while working.

Investigations, however, indicated the injury could have been self-inflicted. Among other things, the axe had a blunt edge and did not have any bloodstains.

The severed finger was found in a toilet cubicle with a chopper and a blood-stained hollow section nearby.

Changi General Hospital, where the worker was treated, confirmed the injury was caused by an object with a sharp edge.

— Channel NewsAsia

Aflutter a ferry ride away

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each player rolls (from non-cashable chips to cashable chips), and we earn from the commission paid by the casino — two-thirds to the player and one-third to us.

It's two-thirds to the player because time is on the casino's side.

"Our business is all about risk and player management. Junkets can go out of business if there is poor risk and player management."

The seafood meal for four cost us about \$25.

ACT 1

The first casino Mr Johnson took me to, Waterfront, was the grandest. It is within fenced grounds and looks like a country club. The size of three MRT platforms, the casino has high ceilings dotted with cameras. It looks like the casinos in Hong Kong movies.

"We get all kinds here — old men, aunties, NS boys, white collar, blue collar. It's a good mix," said Mr Johnson.

"I've got players who place \$2,000 on one bet, and some who come here with all of \$50 in their wallets.

"Most of the players stay overnight. When we take the morning ferry back tomorrow, you'll see this lot go back with us," he added.

Batam's casinos take bets in Singapore dollar-denominated chips. The minimum amount of chips you need to buy varies from casino to casino.

It was a weeknight, yet the Waterfront was bustling. All but two tables were packed with gamblers of all sorts, with almost as many women as men.

Behind the main casino area, burly men in suits guarded a VIP area. Marble furnishings and velvet covered furniture were all I

could get a glimpse of from the common area.

INTERLUDE

We then moved to the second casino. On the way, I chatted with one of Mr Johnson's employees, Wendy, a rolling girl.

For Wendy, and many other Batam residents, the casinos are a welcome development.

Speaking in Mandarin, she said: "An average office worker earns about \$200 a month. Now, as dealers and as rolling girls, for about the same working hours, we can make about \$1,000, including tips, of course.

"It's definitely good for us. Okay, maybe not all good, since now there are more cars around here and there are more traffic jams!"

The economic benefits far outweigh any concerns there might be about the social ills of casinos, she said. The casinos have created employment opportunities not just for those who staff the establishments, but for many others as well.

"People come here to gamble at the casinos, but that's not all," said Mr Johnson. "After half a day at the casino tables, some of them go for massages, play golf or eat the cheap seafood here.

"So, if you look at it this way, the Singaporean gamblers help support the island's economy."

ACT 2

At the second resort, the hotel lobby seemed decent enough, with a signboard listing the day's events, including seminars and retreats held by companies.

But the casino was just a large room. We walked through several dingy corridors to get there. Dingy or not, the place was crowded after midnight.

Just half the size of Waterfront, this place was busier. Mr Johnson accounted for the crowd by explaining that it was

slightly cheaper to gamble here than it was at Waterfront.

The air was thick with the smell of cigarette smoke and burning oil from the food counter in a corner.

The men here had slicked-back hair and wore polo T-shirts, unlike the shirt-collared men at the Waterfront.

There was a Hong Kong-gangster-movie-set feel to this place, partly due to the fact that to get here, visitors had to walk through narrow, poorly-lit alleyways.

INTERLUDE

On the way to the next casino, Mr Johnson talked about some of his clients.

There was the middle aged man who, after dropping his wife off at work, took the morning ferry to Batam, gambled until lunch-time, had a cheap seafood meal, then a massage and, finally, headed back to Singapore by 6pm to pick up his wife from work.

The wife had no clue that he been at Batam all day.

Another was a lecturer at a local tertiary institute, who had two days off every week. On his days off, he visits Batam. All the time, his wife thinks he is at work.

Then, there was the auntie who borrowed the fare for the ferry ride home. She had lost all she had brought with her and was returning home broke.

ACT 3

The third casino was at the resort we stayed at for the night.

It was more up-market than the others we had visited.

There were a couple of golf courses nearby, which may explain the better-attired, more middle-class crowd in the resort.

The casino is about half the size of the Waterfront. It was not very busy, perhaps this was

because it is a half-hour from Nagoya.

It is being said that the fourth casino, Planet Holiday, will be the grandest one on Batam.

However, it has yet to open as the owners are awaiting an auspicious date for its launch.

ACT 4

As if four large casinos aren't enough for one island, there are reportedly plans for a billion-dollar entertainment centre, complete with a casino, on a neighbouring island.

It sounds much like the integrated resort Singapore is considering.

However, while the Singapore proposal sparked off protests about the social ills and other undesirable effects of casinos, there has been no unhappiness reported in Batam.

Those who favour a casino in Singapore argue that instead of having so many Singaporeans flocking to Batam to gamble, we should build our own casino so the money stays within our borders.

US-based gaming and leisure consulting company, The Innovation Group, has estimated that Singaporeans spend US\$140 million (\$229 million) a year at Batam casinos.

But a Singapore casino could have membership or entrance controls to keep out those who don't have enough money to gamble. So, it's unlikely that Batam's casinos would be affected.

Meanwhile, for non-gamblers, Batam is worth a visit if you're looking to enjoy the sea air, beaches, cheap seafood and massage treatments.



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